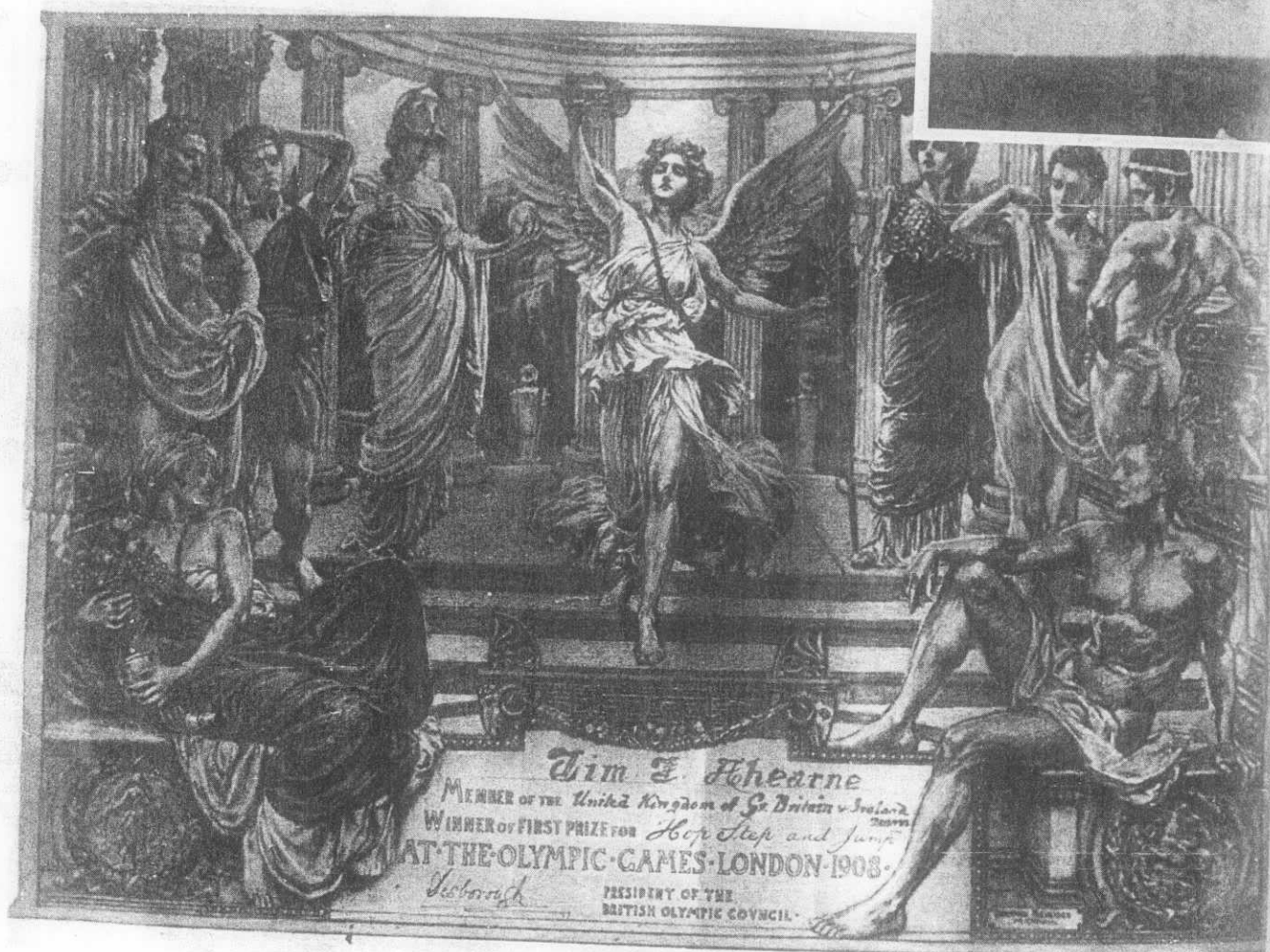


Ireland & the Olympic Games

by Patrick O'Sullivan



Baron de Coubertin's idea that athletes world-wide should emulate the games of ancient Greece came to fruition over a century ago. Although the aura and ethos of the games have since been eroded by nationalism, racism, commercialism and international politics, their appeal has continued unabated, giving rise to quadrennial outbursts of global euphoria. Michelle Smith's achievement of three golds and one bronze at the 1996 Atlanta Olympics meant that Ireland was no exception and it prompts an examination of the country's various roles and achieve-

ments in the Olympic movement and the socio-political factors which influenced, inhibited and even impeded its participation in the games.

Indigenous athletic tradition

The era of the ancient games of Queen Tailte may be a matter of historical conjecture, but even by the most modest estimate their time-span (303 BC-AD 1168) was longer than that of the ancient Greek Olympics. Long before the Great Famine, running, jumping and the throwing of weights were well-established

Tim Ahearne's certificate for the gold medal in the 'hop, skip and jump' (triple jump) in the 1908 London Olympics. (Top) Ahearne in action. (Tom Sheehan)

peasant pastimes, while the cross-country nature of some hurling and football (*caid*) contests, spiced with inter-parish or inter-county rivalry, added a further dimension to this sporting fervour. These activities, though governed by local rules, lacked any central controlling organisation. Such a structure only emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century with the establishment of the Irish Champion Ath-